T/SOR/49/Z/26

# The Battle of Trafalgar

## *Where next for the anti-poll tax movement?*

25p

# The Battle of Trafalgar

**Few could be happy about the mayhem that broke out in Whitehall and the West End on 31st March after the poll tax demonstration. A lot of people were hurt. Many were terrified.**

**When the heart of London is transformed into a war zone, we can expect outbursts of righteous indignation from the Tories. Anxious to take the heat off themselves, they have exploited these ugly scenes to discredit anyone who opposes this unjust law.**

**But it is the Tories' own socially divisive policies that have made Britain a riot-torn society. The riots of Brixton, Toxteth, St. Paul's, Tottenham, Wapping, Trafalgar Square and almost every prison, are testament to the failures of Thatcherism.**

**Predictably, Labour leaders have been anxious to distance themselves from what took place, fearful that otherwise it might cost them votes.**

**But what really happened that day, a day when the streets of London and Glasgow were filled by masses of people wishing to demonstrate peacefully against the poll tax? What lessons can we learn from these events? And where do we go from here?**

**In this brief document, we begin to answer these questions. Our description of the incidents comes from first-hand experiences of ILPers and friends who were on the march. Many of them had a rough time.**

**Our political arguments are based on the ILP's involvement in the anti-poll tax movement from the outset, and on our campaigning in the Labour Party.**

**We would be pleased to hear from anyone who wants to comment on our ideas, as well as people who want to know more about the ILP.**

# How it happened

## 3.00pm

Peaceful sit-down protest outside gates to Downing Street, two hours after the march began. Police in full riot gear charge without warning and beat protestors (photo). Demonstrators respond and jostle with police. Still calm in square.

## 3.15pm

Police cordon off Whitehall to divert march via Embankment and Northumberland Avenue to Trafalgar Square.

Heavy handed treatment causes scuffles and confrontation.

## 3.45pm

Police seal off Whitehall and charge trapped demonstrators with mounted police.

## 3.55pm

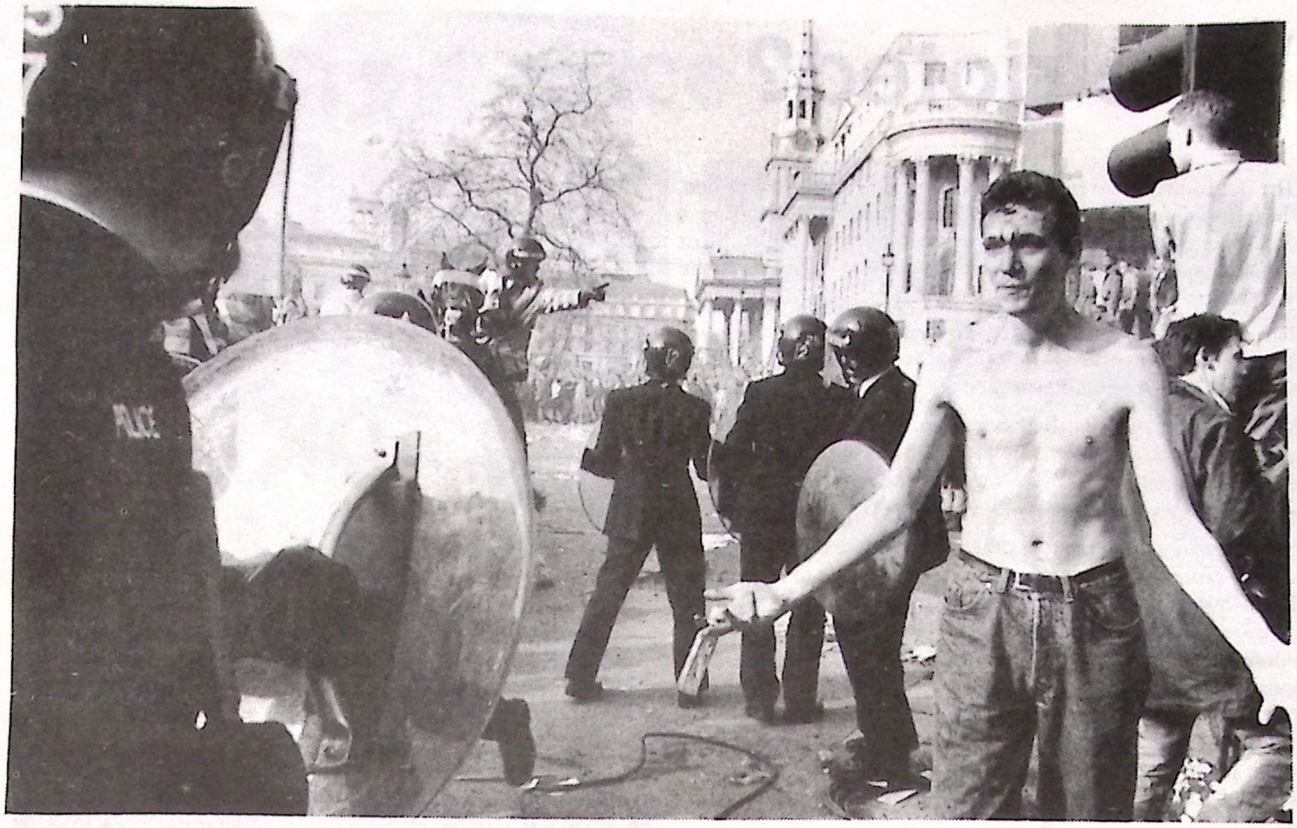
Demonstrators trapped in Whitehall by police cordons escape through side-streets to re-join the diverted march on Embankment and Northumberland Avenue.

## 4.05pm

Crush at Trafalgar Square end of Northumberland Avenue as police attempt to force marchers to enter the square three abreast.

## 4.15pm

Crush so intense that crowd begin to shout 'Hillsborough' to police.



## 4.20pm

As rally ends, angry demonstrators focus on police causing crush at top of Northumberland Avenue and attempt to free demonstrators, many suffering crush injuries.

## 4.25pm

Press photographers climb scaffolding on corner of Northumberland Avenue, followed by demonstrators who throw missiles on police blockade below. Police line breaks and charges away down Northumberland Avenue. Police drive van into crowd at speed supported by 10 officers in riot gear. Forced to retreat by angry crowd.

## 4.35pm

Previously peaceful, but now excited crowd, having freed the crushed demonstrators in Northumberland Avenue, turn attention on Whitehall, which is guarded by a police cordon.

***"The police tried to push us from both sides in Whitehall. People were in a panic. There were young children there and old people, but the horses were stepping on anybody. Everyone was terrified. The police looked as though they were enjoying it. It's no surprise that some people started to throw bottles and cans."***

## 4.40pm

Pushing and jostling, ordinary police retreat and riot police advance, batoning indiscriminately, to edge of Trafalgar Square.

## 4.45pm

Police vans on the Strand drive into crowd at speed. One demonstrator caught up by van and dragged 60 yards. Angry crowd then attacks the vans.

***"I saw the horses charge up the steps of St. Martin in the Fields, where young children had been taken supposedly out of harm's way. They had made no attempt to disperse the crowd peacefully. They just came charging in."***

## 4.50pm

Mounted riot police charge from Whitehall through Trafalgar Square to St. Martin's Lane, batoning and trampling crowd. Followed by numerous further charges, many injuries. Police forays provide target for missiles.

## 5.00pm

Running battles in Trafalgar Square, as police baton demonstrators who respond by attacking police vehicles. Portakabins on scaffolding on one corner set alight.

## 5.00-6.00pm

Most coaches depart.

## 5.30pm

Police force demonstrators to the north side of Trafalgar Square with ferocious baton charges, and disperse them into the West End where sporadic rioting, fighting and looting continue for several hours.

# Who rioted?

The question of who rioted is an important one. To the police, the politicians and the media the answer is clear: over a thousand 'anarchists' who had come only for a fight. Most commentators have also suggested that these people *caused* the violence.

The evidence, however, clearly shows that the vast majority of demonstrators involved in the clashes acted spontaneously, not as part of some premeditated plan.

Many people have identified those involved as an 'underclass', a section of the young people cut off from wider society and hostile to authority, who feel they have nothing to lose.

Phil Kelly of *Tribune* addressed this in the *Independent*: "In London, and to some extent other large cities, there are loose affinity groups of the young and poor, more used to meeting in the downstairs bars of pubs than in the draughty upstairs rooms favoured by the organised left. Their treatment by the authorities - they are often stopped by the police, denied housing, and refused income support - forms the framework of their daily life ... Among the least loved victims of the housing crisis, they have made their homes where there are still flats which inner-city councils seem to have forgotten about, or in derelict houses earmarked for demolition."

This is a somewhat simplistic model. First, there are marked differences within this 'underclass'. There are those who adopt the lifestyle as a political statement, and there are those who have little option. Secondly, the evidence shows that not only this so-called 'underclass' but others, not so clearly dispossessed, were involved in the disturbances.

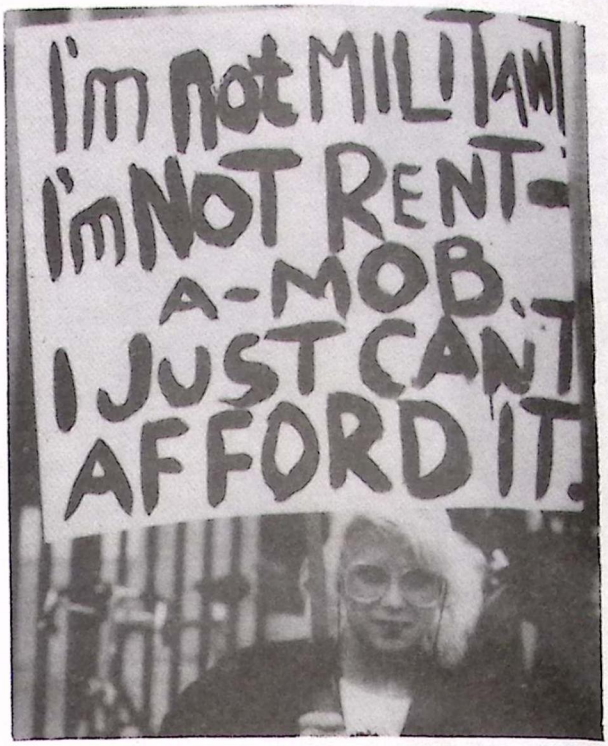
Middle-aged, middle-class women were seen dipping into jewellers' shops; a photographer was clearly visible on BBC news helping himself to a bottle from a grocer's; a Guardian journalist reported overhearing a young Londoner phoning his mate to say "They done Oxford Street, I got a three hundred quid jacket and two left boots". On Monday a Spanish tourist was jailed for 28 days for looting.

There can be no doubt that some very small fringe groups, such as Class War, responded eagerly to the police violence, and have since become willing subjects of conspiracy theories, but they are simply not large enough to orchestrate unrest on that scale.

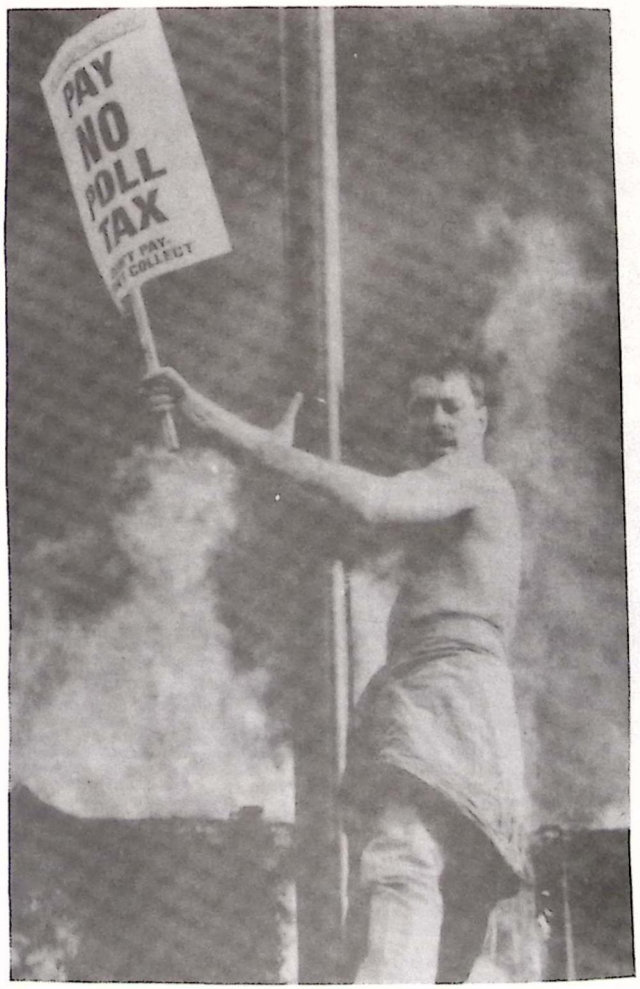
As Martin Kettle pointed out in the *Guardian*, the actions of the police are usually more crucial to the development of serious civil disturbances. He wrote: "Rioting is a spontaneous phenomenon that takes place when the rioters think they can get away with it, both physically and morally. People riot when they have a sense of grievance and when they feel emboldened by circumstances to commit acts of defiance or destruction which require a certain bravery and example. Riots normally start when people witness specific acts of injustice which no longer seem tolerable in the circumstances. Riots frequently then develop discriminately according to the rioters shared assumptions of what is, in their eyes, legitimate."

Like Kettle, we aim to explain not to excuse. But we know what we saw, and it doesn't tally with the version propagated by Tory and Labour leaders; but then they weren't there.

By immediately adopting confrontational street-fighting tactics, police actions led to a severe heightening of tension. Mounted police charged innocent people. Riot police with shields and truncheons hit out indiscriminately, and then, having inflamed the crowd and lost control, they chased the angriest into London's West End.




**"The crowd, still thousands strong, was overwhelmingly a normal-looking bunch of people, and I only hope that they were marxists and anarchists, because if they were, then they've infiltrated every walk of life in Britain. Every home has got one."**



# Police violence

***"I was walking up St. Martin's Lane when the police charged on horseback at groups of people who were doing nothing. It seemed to be a tactic to clear the area, but it just provoked people. It was nonsense."***
Paul Nicholas, Harrow Conservative Party

In the face of political parties competing with each other to congratulate the police on their behaviour, and the media pronouncing simplistic verdicts on the anti-poll tax 'hooligans', the ILP is printing this evidence, based on eye-witness accounts, to let people know what really happened.

Contrary to the glowing reports of police bravery that pervaded the media in the aftermath of the demonstration, the evidence we have gathered from our own experiences and other eyewitness reports, suggests a very different story.

Some of the police actions bordered on crass stupidity, while others smacked of deliberate provocation. Whatever the case, none of the events that we witnessed support Roy Hattersley's claim that police behaviour was courageous and proper.

Below we describe just five instances of gross mismanagement by the Metropolitan police:

## Flashpoint 1

As demonstrators assembled in Kennington Park the police sought unnecessarily to antagonise those elements most likely to cause trouble. They attempted to take black flags from anarchist demonstrators and a police inspector told his officers: "Anyone with black flags, they've all been warned that they're going to get arrested." (Guardian 2/4/90).

## Flashpoint 2

An entirely peaceful and legitimate sit-down protest outside Downing Street (which is protected by 40ft gates), that was not obstructing the flow of the march, was suddenly, and without warning, charged by police in full riot gear. Demonstrators were batoned with a ferocity which inflamed the atmosphere of the crowd.

## Flashpoint 3

To divert the march from the scene they had created outside Downing Street, the police threw a cordon across Whitehall. Two friends separated by the sudden cordon tried to stay together and were wrestled to the ground and dragged away by seven officers. By roughly man-handling the crowd, this potentially calming measure was turned into a violent scuffle.

## Flashpoint 4

As the diverted march reached Trafalgar Square, the police blocked the road and, for no apparent reason, attempted to force the demonstrators to enter the square three abreast. A frightening crush quickly developed and the pushing led directly to the deployment of riot police who batoned demonstrators and became a target for counter attack. This triggered disturbances in a previously peaceful and relaxed Trafalgar Square.

## Flashpoint 5

Having provoked the crowd, the riot police chose not to contain or defuse the tension, but continued to charge indiscriminately both on foot and on horseback. These charges drew large sections of the crowd into the conflict, causing many injuries to peaceful demonstrators, and ultimately forcing the rioters out into the West End. This only made the situation worse.

**The police are supposedly professionals, paid to maintain the peace by containing and defusing such situations. At each opportunity the police actions served only to inflame and incite the crowd. In the event over 400 people were injured, many needing hospital treatment. A more low-key approach by the police would surely have never led to this.**

**What we saw in Trafalgar Square is not new. Over the last fifteen years we have seen a number of police operations of this kind: at Grunwick, at Orgreave, at Wapping and when police attacked students at Westminster Bridge. During the Thatcher years brutal police tactics have been so regular that they have gained a certain 'legitimacy'.**

# Labour's misleadership

Shortly before the demonstration, Neil Kinnock was boasting that the Labour Party under his leadership had been completely vindicated in its arguments and actions against the poll tax.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Leaving aside the length of time it took for party leaders to come up with their alternative tax (let alone any assessment of the merits of that alternative), their real failing, when it comes to campaigning against the poll tax, has been their monumental timidity.

Given their earnest desire to be elected on impeccably moderate credentials, we cannot be surprised that party leaders are desperate to avoid anything that smacks of questionable legality. But this manic political caution does not end there. It has led them to run away from even the idea of organising a national demonstration against the poll tax.

Yet that much, which is so little to ask but so basic to any campaign, surely could have been expected of them.

For two years, the ILP has been pressing for the Labour Party and the TUC to hold a mass national demonstration. On one occasion the party's national executive came within one vote of agreeing, but the party leadership has been intransigent in its opposition. Rather than give a lead, the majority on the national executive preferred procrastination, or when pressed, came up with excuses that were nothing short of pathetic.

But now, having abdicated their political responsibilities, having failed to offer a positive lead to people who had a right to expect some support, having given no encouragement to local campaigns, party leaders have been super-quick to attack the recent demonstration.

In the Commons, Labour's deputy leader, Roy Hattersley eagerly condemned "without reservation or qualification, the violence which took place in and around Trafalgar Square", which he described as intolerable in a democratic society.

But this was not an even-handed denunciation of all who behaved violently that day, whether protestors or police. Instead, he expressed the party's sympathy with "those police officers who were injured in trying to perform the near-impossible task of containing such a large number of rioters." He went on to say how grateful he was to the police "for the duties they performed".

While others are calling for an enquiry into these events, Labour's deputy leader (who was nowhere near the action) feels confident enough to pronounce: "It is inconceivable that violence on such a scale was spontaneous. On Saturday, I called for exemplary sentences for those who were convicted of committing criminal acts. May I today emphasise the importance - perhaps the greater importance - of prosecuting those who planned and organised the mayhem."

Yet, on the very same day that he was moved to such supine and one-sided observations, Roy Hattersley talked very differently about the prison rioters at Strangeways. "If you treat people like animals, they behave like animals." he said, showing a sensitivity that was markedly absent in his earlier remarks.

Those people who were baton charged and clubbed by riot police, some on horseback, in Whitehall and around Trafalgar Square might be forgiven for thinking that, like the inmates of Strangeways, they were also being treated like animals - in their case like hunted, rather than caged, animals.

It's sad that the Labour leadership has shown less awareness of what took place than other supposedly less radical commentators. The *Financial Times*, for example, allowed for the possibility that "the police response was indiscriminately severe" and suggested that "the police should re-examine their approach to crowd control and ask themselves whether it was adequate."

Roy Hattersley conforms to a long tradition of conservative Labour Party leaders. Had it been left to past party leaders, there would have been no Hunger Marches, not even the Jarrow Crusade, for they did not wish to be associated with such activities.

*Roy Hattersley: all praise to the police*

# Breaking laws

To discredit non-violent civil disobedience, many claim that it is illegitimate to defy laws made by democratically elected governments. The only way to change the law is to change the government through the ballot box, the argument goes. Otherwise it leads to civil disorder.

Not surprisingly, those in power are usually the foremost advocates of these ideas. They conveniently ignore what a very limited democracy we live in, just how uneven power is in a capitalist society, and just how powerless most of us are for most of the time.

Labour leaderships have historically toed the establishment line, hypnotised by electoral politics.

Of course, breaking the law should never be undertaken lightly because there are likely to be penalties. But even if we accept that we live in a liberal democracy, there are circumstances when it is still right to defy the law. To take an extreme example, Hitler came to power through the ballot box, and presumably we would have supported illegal acts to defeat him. In the sixties, the black civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, was jailed for disobeying laws which protected racism, and eventually the laws were changed.

It is always a matter of political judgement and conscience whether to accept a law as legitimate. And we agree with Tony Benn when he said of opposition to the poll tax: "Peaceful conscientious objection is absolutely legitimate".

# Civil disobedience

We think that the best hope of developing and sustaining and effective anti-poll tax movement capable of forcing the Government to retreat, is one involving collective civil disobedience allied to mass demonstrations.

Large scale obstructions or occupations, which gain popular support from a broad based mass movement of protest, could significantly raise the political temperature. They could actually make the political cost of the poll tax unacceptable to the Tories.

Moreover, peaceful resistance of the kind used in the peace movement by the Committee of 100 in the 1960s, can be more easily sustained than individual refusals to pay. This kind of non-violent civil disobedience can be engaged in by all those who oppose the tax.

This activity can also secure maximum publicity and public debate. If large numbers of people become involved not only would it boost the morale of the people refusing to pay, or taking whatever action they feel best, but it also seriously embarrasses and hampers the work of the authorities.

This kind of action can be sustained over a long period and can therefore be a continuing thorn in the Government's side, unlike the refusal to pay which is likely to be of dwindling significance as the penalties begin to bite.

In Scotland, a year after poll tax was introduced, large numbers of non-payers have failed to make the tax unworkable. While non-payment is still a valid tactic, the movement must adopt other, more imaginative tactics, both legal and non-legal, if it is to make an impact.

Support for wider forms of non-violent civil disobedience lies somewhere between financial self-interest and the perception that this tax is wholly unjust. It will come from people who see no prospect of defeating it, or getting relief within any reasonable time span, short of messing up the political system in some way. At the radical end of this spectrum is the view that only large-scale social disruption will make the Tories back down.

Within this wing of the campaign there are those who consider that the democratic processes in this country are at best inadequate and at worst close to useless. They see a vicious right-wing government, elected by a minority of the population.

They see a government which is undermining working class institutions, attacking and seeking to destroy local democracy, centralising state power and using that power to attack health, welfare and education and collective care and co-operation.

They see a government extolling the virtues of democracy in one breath while denying it in the next. They see that democracy plays a very distorted part in the Tories' scheme of things when it comes to local government, the Inner London Education Authority, trade union democracy, negotiating rights for teachers or trade union rights at GCHQ.

They see a government that has cut short debates on the legislation that it has pushed through Parliament and which went to extremes to ensure that the House of Lords supported the poll tax by bussing in rich, landowning, hereditary Tory peers.

In short, they see a government of questionable legitimacy, operating in a very authoritarian way, riding roughshod over any opposition, weakening democracy and civil rights and pushing through laws and taxes in the interests of the rich and powerful.

They take the view that a government which operates in this way does not warrant respect; that it is legitimate to challenge unjust laws and to oppose them if necessary by peaceful means which may not be legal.

While this does not amount to a wholesale socialist opposition to capitalism, it is a most reasonable, very understandable and perfectly defensible opposition to Thatcherism.

It should be encouraged and defended as democratically legitimate. For it provides a legitimate foundation for a politics of direct action which can be seen as increasingly necessary, increasingly useful and increasingly moral in the present climate.

Non-violent civil disobedience will also help encourage certain politicising processes to take place. When the cause is seen to be right and when many people are willing to demonstrate their support for it, solidarity grows.

As people confront the authorities with acts of peaceful civil disobedience, they will earn wider respect and their numbers will swell from the ranks of those formerly engaged only in legal demonstrations.

**The message is that a significant minority, perhaps a majority, cannot be forced down into third class citizenship. And if the greed of the affluent and the injustice of the Tory government are set to continue to push Britain further in that direction, then we give notice that we are about to try to foul it up, to stop co-operating, to throw spanners in the works and to deliberately encourage active dissent.**

*Town Halls could become a focus for civil disobedience*

# Broad based movement

A successful and well-organised national demonstration against the poll tax could have had far-reaching effects on the anti-poll tax movement.

If the demonstration had been called with the support of the Labour Party and the TUC, and had mobilised all opponents of the poll tax, not just those who embrace illegality; if the demonstration had marked the birth of a genuinely broad-based mass movement, as CND's mass demonstration in 1980 did; if the march had been led by activists drawn from across the spectrum of poll tax opposition, not just by those who are most able to monopolise leadership positions; if the leading members had concentrated on organising, stewarding and crowd-safety rather than paper-selling; and if that leadership had represented a real movement instead of a loose alliance and had been capable of controlling, not just calling such a demonstration; then perhaps it would have been an enormous achievement.

We are certain that the individual organisers did the best they could. The poor organisation and the stewards' dramatic loss of control is more an indictment of the quality of policing and the state of the anti-poll tax movement nationally. The leadership was elected after a battle, and the national federation is only held together by a fragile truce. By calling its founding conference on the basis of slogans advocating illegality, the federation pre-empted any discussion of a plurality of tactics and instantly turned its back on the majority of would-be legal campaigners. The leadership therefore are left perched on top of a skeleton structure, reluctant to flesh it out for fear of losing control. By imposing non-payment, non-implementation and non-collection as the only valid tactics, they fail to mobilise maximum opposition.

The diversity of this opposition must be recognised.

The majority of those who oppose the poll tax will only engage in activities that remain within the law. They will stop short of illegality for various reasons, ranging from a simple inability to afford the fines, to a reluctance to break any law, however unjust, made by an elected government.

Those prepared to act illegally to frustrate the poll tax are a mixed bag. There are many forms of possible action, ranging from simple non-payment to more imaginative forms of disruption, such as large-scale obstructions and occupations.

Some who refuse to pay are quite plainly people who cannot pay, and they are caught up in illegality without choice. We have to have a care for people in this situation, but we must not assume that a conscious political will underpins their actions.

Others who refuse to pay will have been encouraged to do so by organised campaigns. Most of them are not out to transform the capitalist system but wish to redress what they rightly see as a serious injustice.

As the anti-poll tax groups have grown, however, two things have happened. By relying too heavily on the single tactic of non-payment, the movement that has been fashioned is not sufficiently broad based. It fails to harness not only other forms of civil disobedience, but the active participation of the wholly legal majority.

We have yet to mobilise the millions of people who agree with us. Our movement must be so broadly based that it excludes no-one. Within our movement there must be room for a range of different campaigns based on different tactics. Everyone who opposes the poll tax must have a place in the movement. Campaigns based on non-payment, although important, inevitably have limited appeal. Support for campaigns of wider, more imaginative civil disobedience is potentially great, and could be highly effective. But all non-legal campaigns must rely on the existence of an organised campaign of mass legal opposition. Only then will we have created a truly mass movement.

The non-payment campaign has already started. To complete the making of a movement, though, we need to do two things. First, we need a mass legal campaign, something which Labour Party and TUC support would help facilitate, and something which the ILP has consistently campaigned for. And secondly, we have to build an imaginative, flexible campaign of non-violent civil disobedience.

# What next?

What is needed now is a tolerant and serious debate about how to create a lively and dynamic anti-poll tax movement, one with a tangible presence throughout Britain.

When many thousands demonstrate against the tax in the South of England, when 1,800 line up to sign a petition in a few hours in Whitehaven, and when nurses initiate the largest protest that the town of Hartlepool has seen for a generation, then it's clear that the potential for a mass movement still exists.

A broad movement of this kind will have many different strands. No particular campaign, still less any political group, should try to impose its favoured tactic on another. Each has a role. Each should be respected.

Those who may be willing to link arms round their local town hall, as a means of capturing the public's imagination, but who will not break the law, have a place. Likewise those participate in peaceful civil disobedience, should not be rubbished for doing so.

Nor should we shun the idea of holding a major demonstration in the future. Understandably, many who were baton charged in Trafalgar Square will not relish the prospect of a repeat performance. Also understandably, many who wer not there will have no desire to undergo similar baptisms of fire.

But we should try and persuade them to think again. Because we cannot afford to allow this basic civil right to fall into disuse because people are fearful. Otherwise the authorities will have won. Demonstrations remain a vital part of the political process.

Instead, we need to an event which is properly organised, the route and destination designed to ensure that marchers can travel safely and peacably. And, while it won't be easy, we should not allow the Labour Party leadership and the TUC to escape their responsibilties. We should continue to press them to organise the demonstration.

Perhaps then, when the real strength of opposition to the poll tax is impossible to miss, we will be able to look back at recent events in London in a new light. Not as a tragedy, but as a chance to create a movement that will last for as long as the poll tax continues to exist.

**Founded in 1893 by Keir Hardie, today the ILP is an association of active socialists in the Labour Party with a strong tradition of political campaigning. Want to know more?**
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